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ABSTRACT

The processes of innovation and change at Michigan State University are considered with respect to the Educational Development Program (EDP). EDP refers to innovative programs and organizational changes in undergraduate instruction during 1964-1980. Throughout its existence, the EDP underwent many iterations to make it more acceptable to a changing faculty and student body. Changes in EDP paralleled changes taking place in the body politic of the university. As the university became more democratic, EDP focused more on serving the faculty as a constituency, and faculty gained greater control over academic policy and planning. In the mid-1970s, EDP lost its voice within the central administration and policy-making circles. In addition, financial stress created competition among programs, anxiety among organization members, and involvement of special interest groups in the decision-making process. The builders of the EDP recognized that they were change agents and that the faculty had to take responsibility for the change process. Faculty were encouraged to take credit for their teaching/learning innovations. However, EDP was required to defend its existence; it appeared that the faculty could have accomplished the same changes if the deans had been in charge of the funds. (SW)

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INNOVATION AS A PROTRACTED STRUGGLE: 1964 - 1980
THE MSU EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

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Innovation As A Protracted Struggle: 1964 - 1980
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Those who write about innovation and change in higher education often fail to make the distinction between innovation as process and innovation as practice or product. Over the past two or three decades, numerous innovative practices and programs have been introduced into colleges and universities. The processes by which these practices are adopted, implemented, and maintained may, also, be thought of as innovation.

The product/process distinction is crucial because one cannot evaluate success or failure, effectiveness or ineffectiveness, without first deciding which of the two types of innovation one is talking about. To put it another way, "good" practices may be improperly implemented and fail; and conversely, "poor" practices may be smoothly implemented and survive. Looking back, I would say that the Educational Development Program (EDP) was a successful innovation from a product perspective.[1] But from a process perspective, its advocates lost the protracted struggle that is needed to keep organizational innovation alive.

From the point of view of process, innovation is normally assumed to unfold in stages. For many years, researchers in this area were obsessed with the first stage in this process, adoption. Also, they tended to

1/ The term EDP is used here to refer collectively to a number of programs and organizational entities that were established to improve the quality of undergraduates instruction at Michigan State University in the time period from approximately 1964-1980. In that time period EDP sponsored and facilitated numerous innovative changes in undergraduate instruction at all organizational levels.

ignore the issue of organizational innovation and concentrated almost exclusively on the behaviors and attitudes of farmers, peasants, housewives, managers, and other individual adopters or non-adopters (see for example, the work of Rogers and his many different colleagues, 1965, 1971, 1973). I do not wish to disparage this early seminal work, but I do want to draw your attention to the fact that the implementation and routinization processes were largely ignored. Recently, Tornatzky and his colleagues at the National Science Foundation and others have stressed the implementation stage and more attention is now being given to the whole post-adoption period (Tornatzky, 1982). But to understand our problems with EDP as an innovation, one must look beyond the adoption and implementation stages. We encountered our deepest difficulties trying to maintain practices and programs that had been adopted and implemented successfully.

If you will forgive another brief digression into developments in innovation research, I would like to draw your attention to another phenomena that has only recently received much recognition. I refer to the phenomenon known as reinvention. As product innovations are adopted and implemented, they are often modified or reinvented by their users. Most of those who think about such esoteric matters think of reinvention occurring as an innovation is diffused from one department or institution or other organizational entity to another. But I have concluded that innovations are more or less constantly being readopted, reimplemented, and reinvented. Indeed, about the first of every fiscal year, an iterative process of reinvention and reimplementation is set in motion. To successfully maintain an innovation, one must be prepared to struggle to get it reimplemented over and over again. Often this means that it must also be

reinvented, and sometimes it must be readopted. As you may suspect, change agents grow weary of such a protracted struggle to maintain change. Somehow, after almost 20 years, it would seem that an innovation such as EDP had proved itself and --. But therein lies the real problem, survival is more often than not a matter of process, not product.

With these preliminary remarks out of the way, I want to turn now to our experience at Michigan State, focusing specifically on the maintenance stage in the innovation process, to see if I can draw lessons from that experience that may be of some help to those of you who are struggling to survive.

Little time need to be spent detailing the events that led up to the adoption and implementation of EDP since I and some of my colleagues have already described in detail the struggle of my friend John Dietrich and President Hannahs to get the program adopted (Davis, et al., 1976). They made a heroic effort to convince the faculty at Michigan State that there really was a science of learning and that an institution building rapidly toward an enrollment of 40,000 students had an obligation to apply some of that knowledge. Needless to say, there were many on the faculty who were (and still are) threatened by the distinction between teaching as a process and the subject mater of teaching. Nevertheless, with generous help from the Ford Foundation, EDP was finally adopted and implemented; it survived for over 15 years. In the end, the institution that killed it couldn't quite face up to the deeper implications of what it had done and so far as I know EDP still remains on the books--a ghost that lingers to remind the administration and MSU undergraduates that there was a time when the institution cared enough about them to set aside a tiny fraction of its total budget to support innovative experiments in undergraduate education.

What I have called the protracted struggle to maintain an innovation is affected by a number of factors. In the remaining parts of this paper I would like to discuss some of the most critical of these factors, under the general headings of Iteration, Slack Resources, Interest Groups and The Change Agent Paradox.

ITERATION

Once an organizational innovation has been implemented, it must be nurtured to keep it alive. Two terms are commonly used to describe post-implementation activities directed at continuing an innovation, maintenance and routinization. These words seem to me to be too passive to capture what is really involved in the dynamic effort to defend organizational innovations. In addition to the "natural predators" that lurk behind the walls of Academe, competing innovations are waiting in the wings to displace those already adopted. The period from 1965-1975 was particularly turbulent. Blacks and other minority groups, women, and even homosexuals were all clamoring for special (and expensive) programs. Rapid technological change threatened to leave disciplines such as medicine, chemistry, physics, and engineering far behind the state of the art unless massive investments were made in new laboratories and equipment. Student unrest led to demands for other changes, all of which cost a great deal of money. In the face of such turbulence, no change agent could afford to take the survival of an innovation for granted.

As I have already mentioned, one way in which innovations stay alive is through the process of reinvention. Throughout its existence, EDP underwent any number of iterations to make it more acceptable to a changing faculty and student body. Changes in EDP paralleled changes taking place

in the body politic of the university. As the university became more democratic, EDP focused more and more on serving the faculty as a constituency, rather than the central administration. As the faculty gained greater control over academic policy and planning, EDP worked more and more behind the scenes in a support role.

One of the major reasons programs are reinvented is to make them more acceptable to decision makers--particularly those who control the budgets. This becomes especially important when resources are scarce. But, a prerequisite for such a defense is some "voice" within the central administration and policy making circles. If those who operate an innovative program are too far removed from the decision makers or somehow insulated from them, no amount of reinvention will save the innovation.

In the mid-1970s, EDP lost its voice. Little more need be said about the reason for this than the fact that for purely personal reasons I decided to resign as Assistant Provost. The fact that I wore "two hats," one as an Assistant Provost and another as Director of EDP, created what I perceived to be serious role and boundry conflict, but did give EDP a voice. A number of actions were taken to insure that EDP would have a spokesperson in the administration after my departure. But unfortunately no one, who really understood the program and its interrelationship with other efforts at MSU to improve undergraduate education, was present in the highest circles of the administration at budget time to insure that it would not be severely cut or reinvented with some fatal flaw. Indeed, reinventions may either be benign or they may be harmful in the extreme. Efforts to make EDP acceptable in the closing days of the struggle were certainly not benign and they reflected a gross misunderstanding of the concept itself and the needs of the student body, but a detailed discussion of this would require a book, not a brief note.

SLACK RESOURCES AND FINANCIAL STRESS

Virtually every American is aware of the fact that Michigan has been in a major depression for the past three or four years. But in fact, the State has had severe financial problems for at least the past ten years, and the University system in Michigan has suffered as severely as any sector of the economy of that state. So, one could trace the demise of EDP to State budget cuts and perhaps ultimately to the oil embargo, but it would not be a very profitable exercise. The fact of the matter is that many programs survived at MSU but EDP did not. The really important question is: Why EDP?

In most organizations, the iteration cycle is synchronous with the budget cycle. The annual budget provides an opportunity for reviewing all programs, and in any well run organization, the budget is an important planning tool. It is my impression that the degree to which the budget is used as a planning tool in higher education depends to a large extent on the amount of slack in the budget. If there is very little slack, competing demands for the available funds force a closer examination of all programs than is usually the case.

Under conditions of severe financial stress, several interesting things happen more or less simultaneously. First, competition among programs becomes intense. One important result of the competition for funds is that individuals weigh every decision and action in terms of its impact on themselves and their program. Thus, if members of one department defend programs in another department, they can never be sure that if the program they seek to preserve is saved that one of their own programs will not replace it on the hit list. Under conditions such as

these, it may be best to maintain a low profile; vulnerability and fear motivate silent acquiescence. The destructive impact of such competition on organizational cohesiveness and morale is enormous.

A second important consequence of financial stress is the anxiety that it generates among organization members. Anxiety is destructive because it diverts attention from the primary task of the organization. Organization members spend a large part of their time worrying about their own future and protecting their own turf. As the sociotechnical theorists have reminded us for almost two decades, one of the major functions of any organization is to control anxiety and prevent it from coopting the creative and productive energy of its members. When under budget pressures, a central administration makes proposals that increase anxiety, then something akin to panic sets in and it becomes every man for himself. The most charitable rationale for such an action is that the leadership may be practicing the approach identified with President Reagan in the arms control arena; adopt an extreme and seemingly inflexible position as a bargaining tactic knowing full well that you may later be forced to retreat. Such a strategy may be considered sound from the perspective of labor/management and international negotiations, but it leaves much to be desired from the perspective of organizatinal trust and human relations.

The third and last consequence of financial stress is that it motivates various special interest groups to become intensely involved in the decision making process. This fact was so crucial to the survival of EDP that it deserves special attention.

INTEREST GROUPS

Within democratic societies and organizations, interest groups tend to wield a degree of power and influence that is out of proportion to their size. The older and more politicized the institution, the more vulnerable it becomes to entrenched interests. Some historians have observed that as democratic societies age, interest groups strangle them--that it is only a matter of time. It may be that the emergence of Japan and West Germany as economic powers in the postwar period for example is due more to the destruction of their established interest groups than to the destruction of their industrial base, as some have claimed. In any case, once established interest groups have been mobilized, innovations can seldom enlist the level and kind of support base needed to compete with older programs in the battle of the budget.

During the budget crunch that threatened EDP, many programs were threatened simultaneously. Some of them were older, established programs and some were quite new. A few of the newer programs had a large external political constituency that no administration would dare tackle. The older programs could mobilize their alumnae and professional organizations. It was an unequal contest. The undergraduates, who ultimately benefitted most from EDP, were unaware of that fact because the program operated through the faculty, and for some of the reasons already discussed not many of them were about to raise their voice. Furthermore, the faculty friends of EDP were not generally in positions of political power because they tended to focus first and foremost on the quality of instruction in the classroom--their first concern was with undergraduate students, not university politics.

THE CHANGE AGENT PARADOX

There is a large and growing literature on the role of the change agent. Much of it stresses the importance of the agent remaining in the background. One cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of giving the client a sense of ownership over the change effort. Over and over again, innovations have foundered and failed because those responsible for implementation were not brought into the decision making process and made to feel that they are participants in programatic change.

From the first those of us who built EDP recognized that we were change agents and that the faculty had to take responsibility for the change process. As a matter of policy, we tried to encourage faculty ownership of all of the instructional innovations in which they participated. Many of them would readily admit that their innovations were shaped in the course of their interaction with EDP change agents. I think it is fair to say that the faculty benefitted greatly from the broad range of experience of the EDP staff with the technology of teaching and their understanding of the science of learning. Numerous instructional policy changes were shaped by EDP operating as staff to university committees.

The paradox arises from the fact that the faculty were encouraged to take credit for the innovations that arose from joint efforts. Time after time, the faculty and student newspapers, the local paper, and professional journals would report policy and product innovations on which we had worked as partners with the faculty as being their product. Far from protesting, EDP encouraged these minor "sins of omission" to insure that faculty members bought into the change process. When the time came to defend the program, the administration naturally asked what has EDP

been doing with all that money all of these years? Was there really anything to show for the effort? Over 500 projects had been undertaken, but on the surface at least, it looked as though the faculty could have accomplished the same level and type of change if the deans had been in charge of the funds. Thus, the basic strategy of successful change contributed to the failure to sustain the innovation once it had been implemented.

A FINAL NOTE

All large universities have several different primary tasks, i.e., tasks which they must perform to survive. There is absolutely no mystery about what these primary tasks are: undergarduate education, graduate education, research, service, and (probably) social justice come immediately to mind. Each of these tasks requires its own unique organizational structure, social system, and technology; as a result, universities must be highly differentiated but fully integrated. Serious problems arise when some of these diverse progams seek to optimize at the expense of others, because all of them have a crucial part to play.

It is my impression that at large universities, undergradute education almost always suffers in the unequal struggle among primary tasks, and innovative undergraduate programs are perhaps the most vulnerable of all. Only a strong and committed central administration can bring any balance at all into the contest for resources. But, universities are dynamic institutions. Leadership changes. New administrators want to make their own mark, not merely preserve the breakthroughs of others. As a consequence, the cycle begins again and innovations must be readopted, reimplemented, and maintained, and innovations are placed at risk.

Now I hope you will forgive me if I end on a personal note. Henry Leonard, one of my teachers and an assistant of the great philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, once told a small group of graduate students about a conversation with Whitehead. Shortly before Whitehead died he said that he was not much concerned with what happened after death. It was quite enough for Whitehead, Leonard said, to have participated in the creation of a developing universe. As you know, for Whitehead, the ultimate reality was process, not product, and I am sure he felt that he would live on as process. There is a sense in which the same can be said for EDP. As product it no longer lives; but the processes it introduced are very much alive. So that perhaps EDP really was a success both as product and process after all.

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